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TOMBELAINE

FOREWORD

The isle of Tombelaine is on the French coast near the Abbey of Mont St. Michel. There the English strongly established themselves in 1418, and remained masters of the fortress until 1450. During this period there was constant war between Tombelaine and Mont St. Michel;—one of the few places in northern France which never fell into the hands of any foreign king. The grand assault on that stronghold was delivered by Lord Scales on June 17th, 1434. He had been then, for some years, Governor of the Castle of Domfront, and was next in rank to King Henry's great general, Sir John Fitz-Alan Maltravers.

One of the many tragic incidents that resulted from the frequent affrays is sketched in the following stanzas. At the time described, the Abbey of the Archangel was in charge of its Vicar-General, Jean Gonault, in the absence of the Abbot, Robert Jolivet. From 1084 to 1264 five Abbots had successively added to the beauty and strength of the fortress, but Robert Jolivet, who was its titular head from 1410 to 1444, made the place impregnable by adding a great *enceinte* and five defensive towers. After these important works were completed, this Abbot left the fortress and became a partisan of the English, who allowed him to retain his dignities and titles and to receive, for his personal benefit, the revenues from such of the Abbey lands as lay within the territories held by King Henry. Jolivet deserted Mont St. Michel in 1421 and never returned there.

*What is it that confronts our joy, at whiles,
When ocean, earth and some fair sky unite
To fashion an Eden—that most shadowy sense
Of the Remote returned, like memoried smiles
Of the hushèd dead? Whence comes this fine, swift light—
Too fugitive,—with sudden percipience
Discovering magic in Time's darkened aisles?*

*Tombelaine, vested in sunset, makes appeal
To things mysterious—the lone rock that knew
Our Norman-blooded chivalry, who gave
Life for stern joys of war: the clouds reveal
Treasures above it in the melting blue:
Like an empurpled lioness on the wave
This islet sleeps in sheen of crimsoned steel.*

Some urgent mission of the historic past
Moves me: I see a flag on Domfront's tower
Embroidered with a blazoning of gold;
And a young, laughing palmer, riding fast
Seawards, through sunlight and a little shower:
Clearly the scene appears, as if foretold,
And faintly sounds a ghostly trumpet-blast.

That desert of the soft, Canalian sand,
Now looped with cords of silver, seems o'erspread
By waters, tingling with the northern gale's
Wild lashes; and I see a Prior stand
Wroth on St. Michael's ramparts, and one led
Towards him—a proud-eyed lad—who never quails
Before an uplifted and most menacing hand.

A wayworn palmer seems this tonsured youth
Who, privily, with craft has ventured there,
Hopeful of appraising many doubtful things
And measuring secrets. *"Few may hide the truth
In alien speech;"*—one shouts,—*"when eyes declare
Too clearly whence their roving diligence springs;
In the foe's house there is small chance of ruth!"*

Pinioned is he and tortured, but his tongue
That so betrayed him, shapes no further word:
Then from the light to darkness he is thrown;
His soul being at a trysting-place among
Certain unquiet folk, who have not heard
Tidings that, natheless, have long been blown
Into their hearts disconsolate and unstrung.

Then, sweeping past the ocean-temple, speeds
A vessel set with knights, that cleaves the grey
And rainbowed billows, frothing towards the fort,
Where hangs the flag men see from Domfront's meads;
While monks and chevaliers make wicked play
With bows; and ere the warriors reach their port,
One, in a deathly pallor, sinks and bleeds.

England has given the Abbey a young lord
To famish: now is yet another slain,
Who valiantly at Azincourt had hewn
A scarlet path and left the trampled sword
Burdened. "*These gallants ne'er will laugh again
In Domfront's hall;*" they cried, "*nor harp a tune,
Nor take at Henry's hand the prized reward!*"

The great Archangel on his topmost spire
Glitters a moment in a glory of sun;
The Prior's eyes are turned from Tombelaine
And cast upon St. Michael, whose sharp ire
Is manifest now; and they who have outdone
The foeman's aim exult, where yet again
The arrows leave the walls in angry choir.

A racing flood befriends the boat—men leap
Ashore at Tombelaine: they turn and curse
Oarsmen who vainly follow: they uplift
Stark wrath against those Abbots long asleep,
Who, for the wonder of the universe,
Built their battlements in water swift
With death, and over quicksands dread and deep.

Long has it scorned the foeman who blasphemes
Its wise artificers: since Harfleur first
Saw Henry's face, the cunning of the priests,
Who visioned the Merveille—which to all men seems
Like an inviolate hint of heaven, immersed
In sacred light on which the spirit feasts—
Mocks them by day and nightly dims their dreams:

But against turncoat Jolivet they raise
Loudliest their anger,—he who to their king
Himself submitted, having newly spanned
His fastness with a granite zone which stays
The royal sword:—they curse his magic ring,
His pearlèd crown, his sandals and the hand
Whereon Rome's glove is drawn on festal days.

Now Domfront's chief I vision—gallant Scales—
At meat with Beaudesert and Somerset
In Tombelaine, their fortress of the sea;
While on its walls a servitor bewails
The vanished power of an old amulet;
And, in the chapel, one lies lonesomely
Whose tongue will shape no more enravishing tales.

Sadly they eat, those lords, then sadlier pace
Their thrift-lined paths. The wind went with the tide,
But from the portals of the north and west,
Quicksilver flows again; the Saint's gold face
Is mirrored: soon the dusk is starry-eyed
After the vesper truce, and peace is prest
To the sweet bosom of earth in every place.

Black are the Abbey ramparts where men doze;
While at themselves the savage mastiffs bark
Unheeded: winds and waves are enemies
Most dreaded there, where all high-spirited foes
Impotently break their strength in shine or dark:—
For Michael's rule is dominant o'er the seas
That hold his church as gardens hold the rose.

The silver chimes of Taurus merrily ring
Silent above them: from the ebon shade
Of distant Tombelaine, a boat essays
The current and is soon adventuring
Through velvet water: oars are lightly laid
On the reflected stars, whose silver rays
Light those who fear no bowman's humming string.

All but enisled the monstrous Abbey looms
Gold-windowed in the dark, while Scales withdraws
Unto belovèd Domfront, with his soul
Yearning towards the donjon's mouldy glooms,
Where one, midst dripping horror, fills the pause
'Twixt life and death with thoughts that half console
A proven knight whom chance of war entombs.

As Henry's liegemen cleave the swirling tide,
They see blue, ghostly light round Michael's towers:
Like candle-curious moths the saints appear
About their loved Archangel, who with pride
Points to the stars. In such significant hours
Of strife, folks say the saints by night draw near
Those flames that shew with whom heaven is allied.

*In the archivum of the mind, old names
Dimly-remembered, thus renew themselves
In vision: pale records of a tragic day
Awake: in the young wind, like unseen flames
They palpitate; and as a scholar delves
And finds bright treasure in some classic clay,
These, from Death's quiet, memory reclaims.*

*Dead men I see whilst purple Tombelaine
Cries to my heart: I burn with pride of them,
Knowing not wherefore. Could the walls speak truth
Should I be told? Who shall revive again
For me the long-spent voices? Like a gem
The island lies in summer, and new youth
Ever sweeps over it in sun and rain.*

ROWLAND THIRLMERE.

London, England.